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# Beyond Arabism vs. sovereignty: relocating ideas in the international relations of the Middle East

EWAN STEIN\*

**Abstract.** This article critiques constructivist approaches to the international relations of the Middle East and sets out an alternative interpretation of the role of ideas based on political economy and the sociology of knowledge. It cautions against using constructivism as a way of ‘building bridges’ between IR and Middle East Studies and disputes the claim that the norms of ‘Arabism’ as a putative regional identity are in contradiction with those of sovereignty. The article shows that this assumption is based on the combined influences of modernisation theory and Orientalist assumptions about the power and continuity of regional culture that have persisted in Middle East IR. This is despite the fact that there is no reason to believe the Arabs constitute a more ‘natural’ nation than do the Syrians, Iraqis or Egyptians. The political role and resonance of ideas can be better established by viewing the modern history of the Middle East in terms of domestic structure and social change, and in particular emphasising the role of rising middle classes in revolutionary nationalist movements. The findings of this article raise questions for the utility of ‘moderate’ constructivist interpretations of International Relations as a whole.

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## Introduction

Over three decades since the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, consensus on the role ideas play in the politics of the Middle East remains elusive. Some have maintained that the Middle East should be analysed using the universal tools and methods of social science.<sup>1</sup> Others view this as Eurocentrism and argue for more supposedly open, grounded or atheoretical approaches.<sup>2</sup> Explicit essentialism about

\* I would like to thank Jamie Allinson, Victoria Loughlan, Andrew Neal, Michelle Obeid, Adham Saouli and the three anonymous reviewers for useful comments on earlier versions of this article.

<sup>1</sup> Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Fred Halliday, ‘The Middle East and Conceptions of International Society’, in Barry Buzan and Ana Gonzalez-Pelaez (eds), *International Society and the Middle East: English School Theory at the Regional Level* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Leila Abu Lughod, ‘Anthropology’s Orient: The Boundaries of Theory on the Arab World’, in Hisham Sharabi (ed.), *Theory, Politics and the Arab World* (Routledge, 1991); Timothy Mitchell, ‘The

Islam and Arab culture is relatively rare, and the likes of Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis have become very much straw men in scholarly discussions about the region. At the same time Middle Eastern exceptionalism of some kind seems irresistible to scholars, particularly those of an International Relations (IR) bent with their often reflexive Westphalian sensibilities.<sup>3</sup> The region's distinctiveness is seen to be rooted in a variety of factors including a colonial legacy resulting in unique 'penetration' by outside powers,<sup>4</sup> a preponderance of oil resources, late development and constrained state-formation,<sup>5</sup> exceptional propensity to war and conflict and – especially – shared linguistic, religious, and cultural ties that have had an unusually powerful influence on politics. Raymond Hinnebusch expresses what many now see as axiomatic, that 'the powerful challenge to state identities offered by both sub and supra-state identities makes the Middle East unique'.<sup>6</sup> Convincing approaches to Middle East international politics that consider the role of ideas without either succumbing to essentialisms about Arab identity or Islam or discounting indigenous ideas as codes for universal concerns remain, as Morton Valbjørn has noted, elusive.<sup>7</sup>

Some who have tackled the 'area studies controversy' recently suggest that constructivism could help 'bridge the gap' between IR and Middle East Studies.<sup>8</sup> This article cautions against such optimism. It critiques constructivist approaches to the international relations of the Middle East and argues for an alternative way of taking ideas into account. I argue that constructivist readings of regional dynamics build on a legacy of dubious axioms about shared Arab or Islamic culture, the abiding influence of history and the incompatibility of modern state forms and sovereignty with 'supra-state' identities like Pan-Arabism and Islam. Although the norms of Arab politics are asserted to develop ultimately because of Arab heritage, shared language or common history, these links are neither theorised nor substantiated, which results in a view of regional politics as sharply detached from the social milieus in which these norms supposedly arise. This in turn can be attributed to a non-existent or inadequate conception of state-society

Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science', *GAIA* (2003), available at: {<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/3618c31x>}.

<sup>3</sup> For a concise discussion of arguments for and against Middle Eastern exceptionalism see Simon Bromley, *Rethinking Middle East Politics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), pp. 86–9.

<sup>4</sup> L. Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); *Diplomacy in the Middle East: The International Relations of Regional and Outside Powers*, new ed. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Ian S. Lustick, 'The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: Political "Backwardness" in Historical Perspective', *International Organization*, 51:4 (1997), pp. 653–83.

<sup>6</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, 'The Politics of Identity in Middle East International Relations', in Louise Fawcett (ed.), *International Relations of the Middle East*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 151. For a similar perspective see two articles by F. Gregory Gause III, 'Balancing What? Threat Perception and Alliance Choice in the Gulf', *Security Studies*, 13:2 (Winter 2003), pp. 273–305; and 'Sovereignty, Statecraft and Stability in the Middle East', *Journal of International Affairs*, 45:2 (1992), pp. 441–69. Also, Morton Valbjørn, 'Arab Nationalism(s) in Transformation: From Arab Interstate Societies to an Arab-Islamic World Society', in Barry Buzan and Ana Gonzalez-Pelaez (eds), *International Society and the Middle East: English School Theory at the Regional Level* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Morton Valbjørn, 'The Meeting of the Twain: Bridging the Gap between International Relations and Middle East Studies', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 38 (2003), pp. 163–73.

<sup>8</sup> Andrea Teti, 'Bridging the Gap: IR, Middle East Studies and the Disciplinary Politics of the Area Studies Controversy', *European Journal of International Relations*, 13 (2007), pp. 117–43.

relations in which the state is regarded self-evidently as the repository of modern Westphalian norms and society as a separate realm containing premodern identity.

In this article I suggest not that ideas are irrelevant or secondary to understanding Arab state behaviour, but rather that their significance and 'rootedness' is distorted in constructivist accounts. 'Social' readings of International Relations must attend to more than just the interactions between rulers. I advance instead a more nuanced sociological analysis, with particular attention to nationalism as a social process. Nationalist revolutionary movements in the region have exerted a powerful integrative force, meaning that state and society are not clearly differentiated according to a modern/premodern schema as often seems, at least implicitly, to be assumed. The structure of each state and the shifting nature of state-society relations must be taken into account in order to understand the ways in which ideas have significance, how and why particular idea systems rise and fall, and how ideational and material factors relate to each other. The way norms circulate regionally – indeed globally – cannot be reduced to interstate interaction.

In what follows I sketch the roots of and critique constructivist approaches to the Middle East, primarily that of Michael Barnett. I then put forward an approach based on political economy and the sociology of knowledge as articulated by Karl Mannheim. My aim is not to produce a grand theoretical alternative to the interstate dialogues model that will explain foreign policy or international behaviour in the Middle East or elsewhere. It is rather to suggest a framework for analysing the political significance of ideas that, though sacrificing the parsimony of moderate constructivism, nonetheless provides a sounder basis for the interpretation of links between ideas, regional order, and public and foreign policy. Most generally, this reading challenges systemic or state-centric analyses of international relations.

### **Critiquing constructivism: the area studies/modernisation theory nexus**

First applied to IR in the late 1980s, constructivism has grown to challenge 'rationalist' approaches for the mainstream of the discipline. Constructivism is not just one theory, and most constructivists would deny that it is a theory at all. It is, rather, a set of epistemological and sociological propositions that treat reality and the world as, to a greater or lesser extent, socially constructed. The type of constructivism critiqued in this article, and which has been applied to the Middle East context, is that usually termed 'moderate constructivism', which shares with prevailing neorealist approaches to IR the acceptance of the state and states system as the primary organising and analytical factors in international relations. Moderate constructivists rely heavily on the related but distinct categories of *norms* and *identity*. As defined in the theoretical chapter to a landmark constructivist work, norms establish 'collective expectations about proper behavior for a given [state] identity'. Identity, on the other hand, refers to 'mutually constructed and evolving images of self and other', where the 'self' is the state since 'states operate as actors'. Both norms and identity influence state policies and are *mutually constitutive*: norms shape interests and policies in addition to affecting state

identity. Identity, most significantly for the purposes of this article, affects the interests and policies of states and shapes 'interstate normative structures'.<sup>9</sup>

Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein also draw a distinction between nationhood and statehood: the former comprises 'nationally varying ideologies of collective distinctiveness and purpose' while the latter constitutes 'country variation in state sovereignty, as it is enacted domestically and projected internationally'. Sovereignty is 'the most fundamental institution in international society'.<sup>10</sup> It is this global norm that is 'crucial in the construction of state identity'.<sup>11</sup> State identity, then, is most closely tied to the global norm of sovereignty and coexists, in either complementary or contradictory fashion, with locally distinctive national identity. The Middle East, as will be shown, has been used as an example of a part of the world where these two identities (state and nation) are contradictory: in the constructivist reading it has been 'Arabism', as a collective regional identity, that has informed 'interstate normative structures' as much if not more than the wider interstate norms of sovereignty.

Assumptions about the power of Pan-Arabism, and an allegedly related Middle Eastern diplomatic culture, led many students of the Middle East – long before the rise to fashion of constructivism – to suggest that ideas, culture and identity have a prominent, even constitutive, role in regional patterns of behaviour. Arabism, in particular, has been treated as a normative framework constraining and guiding Arab foreign policy and constituting Arab state interests. Although not the only part of the world affected by increased interest in identity and norms since the end of the Cold War,<sup>12</sup> the Middle East has attracted substantial attention as a region where such factors supposedly enjoy special traction, a trend that was boosted – particularly in relation to religious ideas – following 11 September 2001.<sup>13</sup> The most developed constructivist account of Arab regional politics, that of Michael Barnett, contends that dialogues between Arab states as to the form and content of Arabism have been the central dynamic of the region's modern history.

Barnett's case ultimately rests on his reading of the area studies specialist literature and he admits not to be uncovering 'new facts'. Despite the usual IR approach that sees Arab states as quintessentially realist,<sup>14</sup> Barnett avers, 'few accounts of Arab politics argue that the state's interests stemmed from anarchy; most discuss Arab national interests that derived from their shared Arab identity'.<sup>15</sup> I will analyse Barnett's contribution in more detail later in this article, but will first revisit some of the accounts of Arab regional politics on which

<sup>9</sup> Ronald L. Jepperson, Alexander Wendt, and Peter Katzenstein, 'Norms, Identity and Culture in National Security', in Peter Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 45–59.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Seng Tan, 'Rescuing Constructivism from the Constructivists: a Critical Reading of Constructivist Interventions in Southeast Asian Security', *The Pacific Review*, 19:2 (2006), pp. 239–60.

<sup>13</sup> Mustapha Kamal Pasha, 'Fractured Worlds: Islam, Identity, and International Relations', *Global Society*, 17:2 (2003), pp. 111–20.

<sup>14</sup> The classic in this vein, and Barnett's main foil, is Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> Michael Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 4.

Barnett builds. A large part of the constructivist case rests on the axioms of a canon of scholarship on the international relations of the Middle East dating back to the 1950s.

### *The area-studies legacy*

Approaching the Middle East as a single cultural – and, by extension, ‘national’ – region onto which a states system has been artificially imposed resonates with both the modernisation paradigm in political science and the Orientalist tradition in Middle East Studies. The transition from empires to nation-states in the interwar and post-World War II periods was decisive in steering academia toward the analysis of the state as the primary and essential unit of human organisation. Each new state to emerge from empires was seen to contain characteristics distinctive to itself, but amenable to scientific analysis using universal tools. While content changed, form remained rigidly constant: ‘Each geographical unit was imagined, in turn, to possess an economy ...; a self-contained political system or state; an homogenous body called society; and even a distinctive national culture’.<sup>16</sup> Those involved in social science disciplines could specialise in discrete parts of each nation-state (its economy, sociology, political system, culture), but the study of broader cultural areas was something for which only students of ‘area studies’ were seen to be competent. Soon after the Second World War the newly founded *Middle East Journal* announced that an understanding of any one country in the Middle East could be advanced ‘only through a proper knowledge of all’, and this because of the shared Islamic heritage and experience of European colonialism. The ‘imaginary geographies’ exposed by Edward Said,<sup>17</sup> inscribed and reinscribed by generations of Orientalists, were thus carried over into area studies as scholars ‘brought from oriental studies the idea that the Islamic world formed a cultural unity, based on a common cultural core that only the Orientalist was equipped to decipher’.<sup>18</sup>

Just as relativism in the social sciences went hand in hand with the flowering of nationalism in the colonies, the area studies contention that world regions – defined culturally and constituted historically – were more ‘real’ than the new states that emerged as a result of decolonisation was bolstered by the rise of popular Pan-Arabist political movements and the apparently unstoppable momentum of the Egyptian Revolution of 1952.<sup>19</sup> By the late 1950s, the formation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) between Egypt and Syria, revolution in Iraq and Arab nationalist revolt in Lebanon encouraged the formalisation of a regionalist, and culturalist view of Middle East politics and its transfer into IR.<sup>20</sup> For Leonard

<sup>16</sup> Mitchell, ‘The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science’, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>18</sup> Mitchell, ‘The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science’, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> For one interpretation of that revolution’s regional effects see Maridi Nahas, ‘State-Systems and Revolutionary Challenge: Nasser, Khomeini, and the Middle East’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 17:4 (November 1985), pp. 507–27.

<sup>20</sup> The regionalist approach – not just to the Middle East but for IR in general – was formally and theoretically enshrined by political scientists like Leonard Binder, as well as Louis Cantori and Michael Brecher. For a good discussion of this literature see Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Superpowers*



Binder in 1958 '... the most important characteristic setting apart the Middle East as a subordinate international system is the ideological context of its politics, both domestic and external'. In this 'year of revolution', Binder confidently affirmed that:

[T]he political boundaries which have been established in the area have little historical significance and frequently less ethnic validity ... The existence of such boundaries over a relatively short period of time has tended to fix them in a legal and political sense for the present, but they must be recognized as inherently unstable. If they are to be retained for any purposeful reason, such policy will require positive action.<sup>21</sup>

The cultural context of the Middle Eastern subordinate system, for Binder, explained the volatile nature of its politics. In terms that would become commonplace, he argued that the instability of the Middle East resulted from 'the usual incongruity of nation and territorial state'. Binder extrapolated from this a range of other special features of Middle East politics: the instability of alliances with extra-regional powers; the 'ease with which domestic politics may affect affairs in neighbouring countries'; 'the greater ease in maintaining the *status quo* than in changing it'; and the 'near equality of the role of each Middle Eastern state within the subordinate system'. More ominously, Binder also saw that 'these factors add up to an inherent instability of system, suggesting further that, should external vigilance be relaxed or a domestic (and therefore inaccessible) upheaval take place, violent changes will occur throughout the area'.<sup>22</sup>

Binder's regional approach was pioneering. Although proceeding from the assumption that the states were 'inherently unstable' and artificial, he recognised that new states did exist and that they were conducting relations with each other. Rather than approaching the Middle East in 'wheel and spoke' terms as the relations of individual peoples (Arabs, Turks) and polities (the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, the Palestine Mandate) to great powers,<sup>23</sup> or ignoring the states and focusing only on broad cultural commonalities, Binder prioritised the internal dynamics of a subsystem of states conditioned by history and shared culture to act in distinctive ways. Subsequent studies like Malcolm Kerr's *The Arab Cold War* laid much of the empirical groundwork for the regionalist level of analysis. Kerr accepted, albeit reluctantly, a conception of Arabism as an untheorised independent variable:

Why the idea of unity is so strong among Arabs – so much more than among Latin Americans, for instance, or the English-speaking nations – is a mystery that neither Arab nor western historians have satisfactorily explained ... [W]e shall content ourselves with acknowledging that this obsession, whatever its causes, is an important psychological force, and therefore a political reality, which warring politicians seek to use against each other.<sup>24</sup>

If Kerr reserved judgement on Arabism's provenance, other scholars sought historical explanations for regional identity. In L. Carl Brown's work, political or

*and the Middle East: Regional and International Politics, 1955–1967* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 4–17.

<sup>21</sup> L. Binder *The Ideological Revolution in the Middle East* (New York and London: Wiley, 1964), p. 264.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 264–7.

<sup>23</sup> Some, such as Rashid Khalidi, continue to bemoan the 'wheel and spoke' approach to the historiography of the Middle East. (Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World Annual Lecture, University of Manchester, 23 October 2009).

<sup>24</sup> Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal Abd Al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958–1970*, 3rd ed. (London: Published for the Royal Institute of International Affairs by Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 1.



diplomatic culture embodies the distinctiveness of the region.<sup>25</sup> Brown echoes Binder's convictions about the superficiality of the states system grafted onto the Middle East. He defines the Middle East as the Afro-Asian lands of the former Ottoman Empire, in order to show the lasting influence of the Ottoman heritage, and to root the region's specificity in its history. This results in a tautology wherein the Ottoman influence 'gives the region an identity established not in terms of outsiders' interests but by an indigenous standard, that of having shared for centuries a common political bond'. It is this identity that undergirds his delineation of the Middle East as a unit of analysis and 'system'. The exclusion of non-Ottoman lands (Iran) or non-Middle Eastern states with an Ottoman heritage that would allow him to test 'the relative importance of the Ottoman legacy' is testimony to the *a priori* nature of this assumption.<sup>26</sup>

Brown elaborates his main thesis, that the outside penetration of the Middle East since the early nineteenth century has fostered a political culture peculiar to the region, with reference to the seven 'rules of the game' of Middle Eastern politics.<sup>27</sup> Although he does not make the distinction himself, the rules can be organised into structural and agential characteristics, highly suggestive of the later constructivist norms-identity division. Structural rules include a series of interlocking (kaleidoscopic) alliances, great power interest in the region for reasons of rivalry rather than rationality, and a tendency toward 'homeostasis' – defined as the inability of any one power to impose its will over the others. Other rules relate to the predispositions of agents within the system and are highly reminiscent of the Orientalist essentialism lambasted by Edward Said: the proclivity for the 'quick grab', the disinclination to break issues down into manageable chunks, the preference for reactive politics, the preference for using outside mediators as guarantors, the concentration on tactics instead of strategy and the mentality of zero-sum games. These characteristics, though not unique to the region individually, 'combine to make the Middle East in modern times a distinctive politico-diplomatic system'.<sup>28</sup> The uniqueness of this combination of characteristics, however, is purely hypothetical and not convincingly linked either to the Ottoman heritage or to other causal factors. The articulators or creators of the Middle Eastern political culture are not introduced; the relationship between the agential and structural 'rules' not elaborated. While the views of Western statesmen since the nineteenth century on the nature of the Middle East are examined to show the longevity of 'Eastern question' dynamics, views of Middle Easterners themselves are not explored.<sup>29</sup>

Brown's discussion of a 'pattern of politics' or 'system of political interaction' surviving in the Middle East since Ottoman times anticipated the constructivist reading of international politics in general: a common epistemology shared by all

<sup>25</sup> Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East*.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 5–9. F. Gregory Gause III has also criticised Brown for his vague selection criteria in 'Systemic Approaches to Middle East International Relations', *International Studies Review*, 1:1 (1999), pp. 11–31.

<sup>27</sup> Fred Halliday has described these rules as 'either generic to politics the world over or based on questionable assumptions of historic continuity', though to be fair to Brown it is the *combination* of the seven rules he asserts is unique. Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations*, p. 24, fn. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East*, p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 233–5.

members of the system defines and configures what politics will, or will appear to, be. Under the neorealist paradigm, power had been understood in material terms, with the 'balance' of power constituting the underlying dynamic of international relations. Constructivists and others questioned this as the Cold War came to an end. Many followed the tradition of Michel Foucault, and Edward Said, to see power partially or even primarily in an actor's ability to enforce or otherwise induce others to adopt particular interpretations of the world.<sup>30</sup> Ideas, norms, perceptions, and identity came, for many, to more clearly reflect the complexities and ambiguities of a post-bipolar world, perhaps especially in the Middle East.

Although constructivists are generally at pains to distance themselves from the rationalism of mainstream IR, their view of power as the ability to shape worldviews was far from being marginal to the discipline. Most prominently, Joseph Nye's idea of 'soft power', first articulated in 1990, was premised on the assumption that actors, once persuaded to adopt American values as their own, will cease to pose threats to American hegemony, and focussed on ideas, norms, and identity.<sup>31</sup> As with Samuel Huntington's oft-cited intervention on the 'clash of civilisations', the concept of soft power was further elaborated in relation to the Middle East, and in particular Middle Eastern *ideas* as opposed, and as explicit *threats*, to states:

If the Soviet Union and Communism presented the most dangerous soft-power challenges to the US in the Cold War era, today's greatest challenge comes from radical Islamist ideology and organizations. In particular, the fundamentalist Wahhabi sect . . . has been augmented by radical outgrowths of the Muslim Brotherhood movement.<sup>32</sup>

Such mainstream interest in ideas, particularly Middle Eastern ones, after the Cold War helped to create a receptive environment for constructivist scholarship and an appetite for Middle Eastern case studies. The Middle East has been put forward as an invaluable 'laboratory' for IR, and constructivism touted as a way to 'bridge the gap' between the discipline and Middle East area studies.<sup>33</sup> But such interdisciplinary enthusiasm reflects, and encourages, tautological assumptions such as the following:

Constructivist theories, which . . . prioritise shared experience, norms and values, as against crude measurement of state power, would appear to have considerable purchase in a region where ideas and identity retain strong explanatory value.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Stefano Guzzini, 'The Concept of Power: a Constructivist Analysis', *Millennium – Journal of International Studies*, 33 (2003), pp. 495–522.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

<sup>32</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, 1st ed. (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), p. 96.

<sup>33</sup> Bahgat Korany, 'International Relations Theory: Contributions from Research in the Middle East', in Mark A. Tessler, Jodi Nachtwey, and Anne Banda (eds), *Area Studies and Social Science: Strategies for Understanding Middle East Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Valbjørn, 'The Meeting of the Twain: Bridging the Gap between International Relations and Middle East Studies'; Teti, 'Bridging the Gap: IR, Middle East Studies and the Disciplinary Politics of the Area Studies Controversy'.

<sup>34</sup> Louise Fawcett, 'Alliances, Cooperation and Regionalism in the Middle East', in Louise Fawcett (ed.), *International Relations of the Middle East*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 176.

And:

Constructivism would seem to be particularly relevant to the Middle East, given the exceptional power of supra-state identities (Arabism and Islam) over state conduct and the near absence of the national-states assumed by realism.<sup>35</sup>

To assert the absence of 'national-states' not only accepts that bounded nations exist elsewhere, but also downplays or ignores the integrative effects of state-based nationalist movements in the region while uncritically accepting the assertion that the Arab people constitute a nation.<sup>36</sup> For Barnett, and others that have sought to use constructivism as an alternative to realism, the mediator between Arabism as a set of constraining or enabling regional norms and Arab 'national' identity remains the Arab state as unitary actor. But the nature of this mediation is not theorised. As such, scholars should not accord Arabism, Islam or Middle Eastern diplomatic culture 'exceptional power' over state conduct and from there conclude that constructivism is 'particularly relevant'. Kerr's 'mystery' of Arab desires for unity remains unsolved.

### *The influence of modernisation theory*

Discussions of states in the Middle East have frequently stressed their artificiality, illegitimacy and lack of 'fit' with society. Often formal state structures are approached as modern grafts which Arab societies, belonging to a separate premodern sphere governed by other values and norms, instinctively reject. This clearly resonates with the modernisation paradigm, which posits the progressive universalisation of Western economic, political and cultural patterns, in particular the nation-state format. Analyses that give centre stage to Arabism as a normative framework emerging from Arab identity imply that this 'internal' variable, if not more significant in conditioning regional politics than the 'external' factor of modern Westphalian norms, at least qualifies and disrupts the 'normal' interactions of these states.<sup>37</sup> The progressive normative evolution from Arabism to sovereignty in the Arab World seems at least implicitly to be attributed to the success of modernisation in the region: as the incongruity between state and nation recedes, politics become more 'normal'.

<sup>35</sup> Hinnebusch, 'The Politics of Identity in Middle East International Relations', p. 160.

<sup>36</sup> Constructivist frameworks should, moreover, be universally applicable and not 'particularly relevant' to the Middle East. Hinnebusch stops short of wholehearted support for constructivism by arguing it must be supplemented with 'structuralist accounts of material constraints'. But such theoretical eclecticism seems unnecessary when structuralism alone would have no problem incorporating ideas as a variable in this way: few followers of Marx or Waltz would object to the notion that ideas are significant, but only within the constraints imposed by the material world or international system. See *The international politics of the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

<sup>37</sup> This internal and external differentiation, and attendant Eurocentrism, has been noted with respect to general constructivist works treating identities and norms, which carry similar biases: 'good' norms such as human rights and respect for sovereignty originate in the West. See Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 4 (2001), pp. 391–416.

Since the first major application of modernisation theory to the Middle East,<sup>38</sup> studies in this tradition have sought to uncover and explain obstacles to modernisation (or democratisation), with some variant of 'culture' often topping the list. The classic example remains Michael Hudson's *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy*.<sup>39</sup> The Weberian concept of legitimacy here hinges on the relationship between state and nation:

The legitimate order requires a distinct sense of corporate selfhood: the people within a territory must feel a sense of political community which does not conflict with other subnational or supranational communal identifications . . . Without authoritative political structures endowed with 'rightness' and efficacy, political life is certain to be violent and unpredictable.<sup>40</sup>

The 'legitimacy crisis' that states of the Middle East face stems from the fact that the modernisation 'package' has disrupted but not replaced 'traditional political relationships' in the Arab world.<sup>41</sup> Legitimacy can thus be created only by reversing modernisation (unthinkable under the paradigm) or through the trickle-down of modern norms into society, at the expense of 'traditional' identities and patterns of behaviour.

Modernisation theory, whose problematic reification of both the 'traditional' and the modern was convincingly exposed some time ago,<sup>42</sup> continues to colour work on the role of ideas in foreign policy, with the dichotomy of modern norms 'outside' and traditional identities 'inside' clearly maintained. John Ruggie, for example, has argued that 'fundamental modernist concepts such as market rationality, sovereignty, and personal privacy would not have been comprehensible before the development of appropriate terms of social discourse', and that 'neither human rights nor sovereignty nor Stalinism would have made any sense in those pre-modern societies in which people's lives were governed by notions of magic or fate'.<sup>43</sup> Again, it is society that is premodern while the state is modern: 'For traditionalist or religious fundamentalist societies even today', Keohane and Goldstein surmise, 'the individualistic and secular scientific premises of [the modern] world-view remain intellectually and morally alien'.<sup>44</sup> In other areas of IR and Foreign Policy Analysis, the parallel distinction between 'strong' and 'weak', or premodern, modern or postmodern states is made to reveal the variable integration between state and society, phase of state-formation, or the extent of a regime's legitimacy in the eyes of a population.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (Glencoe, Ill: Free Press, 1958).

<sup>39</sup> Michael C. Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Dean Tipps, 'Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective', *Comparative Studies in History and Society*, 15 (1973), pp. 199–226.

<sup>43</sup> Cited in R. O. Keohane and J. Goldstein 'Ideas and Foreign Policy: An Analytical Framework', in R. Keohane and J. Goldstein (eds), *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (London: Cornell University Press, 1993).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>45</sup> K. J. Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: the Structure of International Security* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Advocates of the concept argue that legitimacy is what ultimately allows the state to monopolise the rightful use of violence and is a quality bestowed upon the state, or the government, by 'society'.<sup>46</sup> State leaderships must seek to project ideas that accord with societal values in order to earn or retain legitimacy. Thus, according to one example, the Egyptian president Sadat used Islamic symbols in order to appear more legitimate: 'Sadat attempted to bolster Egypt's Islamic identity for political reasons, only to discover that religious groups violently opposed his version of that identity'.<sup>47</sup> If, the logic follows, Sadat had got the identity 'right', he may not have had to pay the ultimate price. A key component of this dichotomous view, rooted in modernisation theory, is thus the uncomplicated conceptual distinction between state and society, and the reification of each. To return to Hudson:

The governmental system and leadership that is genuinely national, that partakes of the nation's history, that acts in accordance with the society's values, and that protects its broadest concerns is likely to be regarded as legitimate, even though particular decisions and leaders may be unpopular or unwise.<sup>48</sup>

Were one to elaborate further on the Sadat example, one would conclude that if Sadat had chosen the correct identity, then his visit to Jerusalem and the subsequent peace treaty with Israel may have been unpopular but would not have delegitimised the leadership itself. This reading overstates the leadership's power to select identities at will, understates the diversity of societal interests and perspectives at stake, and is silent on how state and society relate to one another both ideationally and structurally. It is difficult to imagine which identity Sadat could have chosen that would have rendered his foreign policy moves acceptable to those that eventually carried out, or supported, his murder.

This critique should not be read as implying that no differentiation between state and society is possible or denying that leaders make choices with reference to, and seek to engage with, a concept of national identity. But when studying issues of normative change, and their relevance to international behaviour, 'society' as a concept must be unpacked to foreground the resonance ideas have with more specific societal groupings. Further, the relationship between groups and the state leadership should be understood as a dynamic process.<sup>49</sup>

### *The Dialogues model*

Much of the literature on the role of identity and ideas in the Middle East fails to explore the role of the domestic environment in mediating the interplay between

<sup>46</sup> Christian Reus-Smit, 'The Idea of History and History with Ideas', in Stephen Hobden and John M. Hobson (eds), *Historical Sociology of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 124.

<sup>47</sup> S. Telhami and M. N. Barnett *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Hudson, *Arab Politics*, p. 2.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Barnett himself has rightly observed that 'constructivists have incorporated domestic variables in either an ad hoc way or by reference to institutional theories', without any 'rigorous theories of state-society relations'. 'Historical Sociology and Constructivism: an Estranged Past, a Federated Future?', in Stephen Hobden and John M. Hobson (eds), *Historical Sociology of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 104.

norms (coming from outside via the state) and identity (emanating from society). In *Dialogues*, for example, Barnett stresses that the normative framework of Arabism emerges from Arab identity: from a cultural 'toolkit' or 'storehouse', but beyond imprecise references to shared language and heritage does not demonstrate from where this cultural reservoir comes, or how it is mediated by the state to inform frameworks of regional order. This is striking given that on the one hand Barnett disavows second-image analysis, yet bases his entire model on the influence Arabist ideas have on Arab 'societies'.

Barnett's work has been influential on multiple levels. It has constituted an important point of engagement with the Middle East for the IR community, thus helping to generate IR theory,<sup>50</sup> and has more broadly encouraged attention to norms and identity as constitutive factors in world politics. And, it has fed back into Middle East area studies as an example of the utility and explanatory power of constructivism.<sup>51</sup> Barnett's ongoing interest has been in the tension between statist norms and those of Arabism in Middle Eastern politics. The 1998 *Dialogues in Arab Politics* fleshes out an argument first aired in articles in the early 1990s, as well as a chapter in the influential 1996 Katzenstein volume discussed above.<sup>52</sup> As such, Barnett's work forms part of the early wave of post-Cold War interest in identity questions. The author builds on the long tradition of viewing Middle Eastern culture or norms as in constant tension with an imposed states system. L. Carl Brown's 'Middle Eastern political culture' – the rules of the game since Ottoman times – become, for Barnett, the norms of 'Arabism'.

Barnett's intention is to 'advance a narrative of Arab politics that is theoretically distinctive and historically instinctive' and to:

Reconceptualize the history of inter-Arab politics, approach the debate over the desired regional order as Arab states and societies did, understand why Arab states competed through symbolic means to establish the norms of Arabism, and recognize how and why those ongoing struggles over the desired regional order caused the fragmentation in the Arab states system.<sup>53</sup>

Barnett defends his focus on the 'third-image', that of interstate interaction, by rejecting in perfunctory fashion literature on Middle East state formation that claims that 'the softer the state is, the more it will gravitate toward transnational ideologies: the harder it is, the easier it finds the forwarding of its own interests', and that 'Arab states were more likely to lean on transnational forces if their societies perceived these states as artificial'. While allowing some validity to these second-image interpretations, Barnett rejects them as they assume that "stateness" must be theoretically and logically linked with a particular set of practices

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, the section on the Middle East in Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*. See also, Jack Snyder, 'Empire: a blunt tool for democratization', *Daedalus*, 134:2 (Spring 2005).

<sup>51</sup> See, in addition to examples previously referenced, Elie Podeh, 'To Unite or Not to Unite – That is Not the Question: the 1963 Tripartite Unity Talks Reassessed', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 39:1 (January 2003), pp. 150–85. This highly empirical article uses Barnett's contributions as an organising framework.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Barnett, 'Institutions, Roles, and Disorder: The Case of the Arab States System', *International Studies Quarterly*, 37 (1993), pp. 271–96; 'Sovereignty, Nationalism, and Regional Order in the Arab States System', *International Organization*, 49:3 (1995), pp. 479–510; 'Identity and Alliances in the Middle East', in Peter Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security* (1996).

<sup>53</sup> Barnett, *Dialogues*, p. 5



tantamount to realism and *realpolitik*'. He concludes that 'domestic structures are not the wellspring of international norms; rather, they emerge from interstate interactions'.<sup>54</sup>

The problem with this summary dismissal of the literature on domestic structures is that it is justified solely with reference to the constructivism/realism debate. The literature Barnett is rejecting falls broadly within the modernisation (and at least quasi-realist) paradigm that adopts a dichotomous view of state-society relations centred on the Weberian concept of 'legitimacy', as suggested by the phrase 'their societies perceived these states as artificial'.<sup>55</sup> Barnett has decided in advance only to study interstate interactions – to 'understand why Arab states competed through symbolic means to establish the norms of Arabism'. At no point does he entertain the possibility that state-society relations may be more complex or nuanced than this, or that there may be analyses of domestic structures that do not result in '*realpolitik*' conclusions but nonetheless disrupt the parsimony of the interstate dialogues model. In engaging with, if only to reject, the modernisation tradition of area studies, Barnett reveals his acceptance of its terms of reference. Such selective rejection of the literature on state-society relations would perhaps be understandable were it not for the central role Barnett's model actually accords to societal variables in informing the 'norms of Arabism'.

Barnett is very specific about the content of Arabism as a normative framework, which means more than just feelings of solidarity or common purpose among Arabs: the norms of Arabism were 'created' in the interwar period, secured during the decade 1945–55, and then they declined after 1963.<sup>56</sup> The Arab norms that emerged out of the machinations around the Baghdad Pact, and which were subsequently reinforced concerned, were: 1) the status of Israel and the question of Palestine; 2) relations with the West; and 3) the prospects and desirability of unity.<sup>57</sup> These three issues formed the basis of the Arab 'dialogues' Barnett describes. But the links between these specific concerns and the resonance they have with the putative Arab nation so often invoked to explain regional peculiarities are simply asserted and ultimately rest on generalisations about the views of Arab society:

Arab leaders felt little hesitation in appropriating the symbols of Arabism in their search for regime stability and regional influence, recognising that such symbols were ripe for accumulation and highly effective in controlling the foreign policies of other Arab states because *their populations more readily identified with the symbols of Arabism than with the symbols of state*.<sup>58</sup>

Barnett puts the Middle East forward as a test case for an approach of universal scope and is primarily concerned with using the region to build a case against realism, since 'the tools of conflict did not come from a military arsenal. They came from a cultural storehouse'.<sup>59</sup> His findings are generalisable because 'identity debates may be more prominent, or at least more easily identifiable, in Arab

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 14–15.

<sup>55</sup> The authors Barnett cites to substantiate his point here are Avraham Sela, F. Gregory Gause III, Rex Brynen, Amatzia Baram, and Albert Hourani.

<sup>56</sup> Barnett, *Dialogues*, pp. 55–83.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., emphasis added.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 10.



politics for what may be historically specific reasons, but their prominence helps illuminate some features of global politics that have largely been ignored by scholars of international politics'.<sup>60</sup> Although there is no reason why the Middle East should be any less involved in the internecine paradigm wars of IR than any other part of the world, the assertion that culture and ideas, the historical legacies of empire, and – especially – the lack of congruity between state and nation mark out or explain the peculiarities of Middle East politics remains at best hypothetical. Although making a case for a 'third image', or systemic, approach to normative change in the Arab world, Barnett's case rests ultimately on a 'second image' – domestic or societal – variable. But he is silent on how – and which specific parts of – populations readily identify with, and thus shape, the symbols of Arabism.

Examples of the imprecision with which societal variables are addressed, and the silence on how norms and identities are 'co-constitutive', abound in the book. In explaining Nasser's decision to enter into union with Syria in 1958, for example, Barnett identifies lack of pressure from society to enact particular policies as evidence of the causal nature of interstate dialogues, in the process detaching norms from the identity that supposedly sustains them:

Imperatives of regime survival, combined with symbolic accumulation and entrapment, set into motion a series of developments that increased normative integration and mutual orientation. But no evidence exists that this outcome [union] was desired or planned by the key participants, demanded by unforgiving societal elements, or dictated by strategic considerations.<sup>61</sup>

Barnett's invocation of 'societal elements' is revealing. While Nasser's pursuit of prestige in the eyes of Arab publics was undoubtedly real, it is nonetheless striking the extent to which regional norms have been analytically separated from the societies to whose identity they supposedly relate. The structural characteristics of the societies involved, and the ways in which they mediate between identity and norms, are ignored or invoked as straw men in order to further the argument. It is hard to imagine which 'unforgiving societal elements' in the Egypt of 1958, for example, could have pressured Nasser into doing anything. The state was organised in a tightly corporatist fashion and Nasser enjoyed broad populist appeal. The only opposition of any strength, the Muslim Brotherhood, had been harshly suppressed, and the weak communist movement (which in any case opposed union) survived strictly at the regime's pleasure. We will return to this question below.

If the formation of the UAR represented the apogee of Arabism as a regional norm, for Barnett, the subsequent squabbling within the radical Arab camp sowed the seeds of its eventual demise. The outcome of Nasser's bitter quarrel with Abd al-Karim Qasim of Iraq, by discrediting unity, 'would further the cause of statism' as a regional norm.<sup>62</sup> The decline of Arabism is portrayed in dialectical relationship to the rise of the norm of sovereignty, with the two representing opposite ends of a continuum. For Barnett, the 'norms of sovereignty' have progressively triumphed over those of Arabism in tandem with the increased *legitimacy* of the Arab states themselves:

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

A dramatic development in Arab politics is the greater agreement among Arab states that regional order should be premised on the norms of sovereignty. And the emergence of sovereignty in this instance is descriptively and analytically connected to the rise of statist identities that are better able to compete with an Arabism that generates alternative expectations. Indeed, the features that once defined Arab politics and Arabism – confronting Israel, shunning strategic alliances with the West, and territorial unification – have declined in prominence and have left many wondering what is distinctive about Arab politics.<sup>63</sup>

The regionalist tautology is restated: something should be distinctive about Arab politics because they are Arab politics. The ‘rise of statist identities’ means the narrowing of the incongruity between state and nation as individual states and their leaderships become more legitimate. The attendant modernisation package enables leaders to partake of global norms, freed from the distorting influence of society’s Pan-Arab identifications. This, in turn, is translatable in political or foreign policy terms as openness to the West, rapprochement with Israel and acceptance of existing state borders. It is not incidental that the dialogues model sees evolution toward ‘normal’ politics corresponding so closely with core Western interests in the region, especially given the political context in which ideational approaches to world politics developed.

### Nationalism and social change: beyond Arabism vs. sovereignty

The problems with the constructivist approach as outlined above are thus twofold. First, the power of regional identity over state behaviour, particularly its detraction from sovereignty, is not demonstrated but is rather assumed, as it is in much of the area studies literature on which Barnett draws. Second, the uncomplicated and dichotomous view of the state-society relationship, and quasi-voluntarist conception of identity choices, precludes consideration of internal factors, obscures the ways in which state, society and the international interrelate, and thus produces a distorted picture of ideas, their role and significance in the politics of the region. The norms of sovereignty are implicitly linked to modernity and the broader Westphalian norms of an *external* international system, whereas the *internal* Arab identity that renders the Middle East distinctive is viewed uncritically and *a priori* as a premodern residue deriving from the common cultural heritage, predispositions and history of the region.

In the next section of this article I outline – albeit in largely skeletal form – a more nuanced approach aimed at relocating ideas in the international relations of the Middle East. The following alternative takes the ‘social’ commitments of constructivists seriously, but insists that this must be taken to mean more than the interactions between states, or their leaders. Identity at the state level does not arise preformed and available for regimes’ exploitation, and nor is it selectable by regimes from a ‘menu of choices’.<sup>64</sup> The alternative approach draws on political economy, and sociological, traditions within Middle East Studies. These are exemplified in the study of domestic politics by the work of scholars like Nazih

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>64</sup> Telhami and Barnett, *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, p. 13.

Ayubi, Hana Batatu, Asef Bayat, Roger Owen, and Sami Zubaida; and in the international sphere most prominently via the contributions of Simon Bromley and Fred Halliday, though characteristically the distinction is blurred for such writers.

*A Mannheimian approach to ideas in the Middle East*

An understanding of the role, significance and provenance of ideas in the international relations of the region, can also be enriched by applying insights derived from the sociology of knowledge, as elucidated by its principle founding father, Karl Mannheim.<sup>65</sup> Mannheim's critique, via Marx, of Hegel mirrors in some ways the current paper's case against moderate constructivism and remembering Mannheim's relationship with IR as a discipline revives an old, yet clearly still relevant, debate. His ideas are familiar to students of IR primarily via E. H. Carr who, in his 1939 work *The Twenty Years Crisis*, applied insights about the role of classes and groups in the formation of 'ideology and utopia' to the state as a corporate actor to the international realm.<sup>66</sup> Carr justified this move by rejecting Marx's discovery that 'all thought was conditioned by the economic interest and social status of the thinker', noting that '[t]his view was perhaps unduly restrictive. In particular Marx, who denied the existence of "national" interests, underestimated the potency of nationalism as a force conditioning the thought of the individual'.<sup>67</sup>

Mannheim had rejected Hegel's idea that ideology (or what may now be termed 'identity') was unified and stabilised at the level of the nation-state, varying with nationality as a *volkgeist*. Following Marx, he insisted that intellectual forms and worldviews varied with social class, and not only between states or nationalities. Carr in a sense brings Hegel 'back in' by stressing the 'potency of nationalism'. This had the effect of allowing state to eclipse class as the source of ideology and locus of normative or cultural change, which arguably left a heavy mark on the discipline of IR as a whole. It is thus fitting to return to Mannheim for a way to bring ideas back 'inside' the state.

Karl Mannheim argued that the ideas and ideologies we associate with modernity originated in the experience of social groups, in particular the rising bourgeoisies in the states of Europe that sought to wrest political power from the church. Mannheim saw ideological change (or shifts in national identity) as a continuous, and destabilising, process; with the social mobility produced by capitalism leading elite intellectuals to assimilate the concerns and worldviews of

<sup>65</sup> K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960). Fred Halliday was also in favour of taking Mannheim seriously, though for different reasons. Halliday's concern was to rehabilitate Orientalist research after the Saidian onslaught from the 1980s. Mannheim, he argued, showed that ideas did not lose their validity on account of their provenance. See "'Orientalism" and its Critics', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 20:2 (1993), p. 159.

<sup>66</sup> E. H. Carr and M. Cox, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), II. For a cogent analysis of Carr's debt to, and modification of, Mannheim's sociology of knowledge see Charles Jones, 'Carr, Mannheim, and a Post-Positivist Science of International Relations', *Political Studies*, 45:2 (1997).

<sup>67</sup> Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, p. 66.

lower strata, while rising groups adopted elements of elite culture.<sup>68</sup> The result was a revolutionary dialectic wherein 'ideology', which legitimised the *status quo*, embraced elements of 'utopia' that would, if realised, upset the established order, and vice versa. There is more to Mannheim's sociology than this, but these insights are most suggestive for our purposes.

For constructivists norms and identity are mutually constituted. But, in Barnett's work at any rate, this co-constitution of the norms of Arabism and Arab identity is asserted rather than demonstrated. The section that follows shows, firstly, some of the ways in which the norms of Arabism identified by Barnett do in fact relate to local identities and, secondly, the ways in which statist norms are also related to these identities. These processes reinforce, rather than contradict, each other. For reasons of space, the discussion below is suggestive and introductory, rather than exhaustive, in nature. No attempt is made to cover equally or comprehensively all parts of the Middle East, or to justify the examples cited. My intention is not to develop a grand theoretical alternative to the dialogues model for explaining state behaviour, but is rather to suggest ways in which a sociology of knowledge approach could provide a better foundation for analysing the role and provenance of ideas as 'wellsprings of international norms' in the Middle East.

The straightforward association of the norm of sovereignty with externality, as opposed to internal identities like Arabism or Islam, appears on the surface to be justified historically: 'modern' ideas and institutions, including state sovereignty, originated in Europe and were exported around the world via imperialism. But, as we know from Mannheim, the ideas themselves were not the product of European culture or identity *per se*. The Westphalian norm of sovereignty related fundamentally to the worldviews of the rising bourgeoisies of Europe. It expressed the transition from feudalism to absolutism and the interests of aspiring classes in that change.<sup>69</sup> Although the 'capture' of the state by bourgeoisies successfully disguised the fact, they were not primarily attributes of European 'national' cultures or identities.<sup>70</sup> The same applies, as will be shown below, to the Middle East.

To be sure, statist norms, ideology, and structures did not arise in the Middle East, as in Europe, out of indigenous social struggle, though it is wise to be cautious about too categorical an insistence on the West's exclusive ownership of capitalism and its institutional and intellectual forms.<sup>71</sup> But they were nevertheless championed by intellectuals of discernable social groups: those belonging or linked

<sup>68</sup> Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, p. 31. The question of intellectuals, in particular Mannheim's conception of a 'free' or 'classless' intelligentsia that collectively synthesises the ideas of society's contending classes, is a complex one that cannot be explored here. Mannheim differs sharply here with an otherwise similar sociologist of intellectuals, Antonio Gramsci, for whom intellectuals remain class-bound and ideology in the modern state is 'bourgeois' ideology. For a discussion of the sociology of intellectuals, see Michiel Baud and Rosanne Rutten, 'Introduction', in Michiel Baud and Rosanne Rutten (eds), *Popular Intellectuals and Social Movements: Framing Protest in Asia, Africa, and Latin America* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>69</sup> For an historical discussion of this process around the world, as well as an argument for the distinctive role of the 'political', over the purely economic, in this transition, see Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, (London: NLB, 1974).

<sup>70</sup> Gramsci's ideas on hegemony are directed toward the elucidation and explanation of this disguising. See, for example, Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York and London: International Publishers: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), p. 327.

<sup>71</sup> See Peter Gran, *Islamic Roots of Capitalism: Egypt, 1760–1840* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998).

to the expanded ruling and bureaucratic elites of Egypt, Iran and the Ottoman Empire. Intellectual innovators during the formation of the modern Middle East were often landowners, merchants or professionals associated with the small but growing capitalist sectors that emerged, with variable orientations *vis-à-vis* the state, in the Ottoman Empire, Iran and Egypt. Westphalian norms, of the sovereign nation-state as the primary and ultimate form of political identification, generally speaking reached the Middle East via a small class of elites with an interest in maintaining their position at the intersection of local and global markets. They were strongly encouraged by imperialism and advanced by elites who strove with varying degrees of success, often through temporary alliances with established – generally religious – sources of knowledge production, to connect them with existing worldviews and structures. This applied to the supporters of the Tanzimat reforms in the Ottoman Empire, as it did to the coterie of intellectuals around the Muhammad Ali dynasty in Egypt and the narrow educated intelligentsia that gave conceptual form to Iran's Constitutional Revolution.

Modern norms thus had a clear class association in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and such ideas may initially have appeared superficial, representing 'ideologies in the banal sense of the word, imported as readily as new fashions in clothes'.<sup>72</sup> But as Aziz al-Azmeh has memorably countered, although such ideas:

are of European provenance, their universality implies, in the strongest sense, that they have become indigenous elsewhere, being locally produced and reproduced, not unlike cricket, which is played rather better in the former colonies than in its country of origin.<sup>73</sup>

The international expression of this 'regime of modernity' linked to the formation of national markets which 'established the state as the main actor in the cultural and legal fields, making the state the node of hegemonic activity within society', is the norm of sovereignty. The modernity of early Arab, Iranian and Egyptian nationalisms included – indeed necessitated – veneration of the norm of sovereignty. Awareness of and respect for sovereignty became, as the modern Middle East took shape, part and parcel of upper and, increasingly, middle class culture. To cite one example, in perhaps the most ostensibly 'artificial' of nascent Arab states, Iraq, there was 'some inherent contradiction between the ideal of one Iraqi people and that of one Arab nation, but the element of contradiction was mitigated by the fact that the aim of pan-Arab unity – as distinct from inter-Arab cooperation – was at no time actively pursued'.<sup>74</sup> Some of the popularity of the more radical (as opposed to monarchical) Pan-Arabism among the middle classes, particularly the military, in the 1930s and 1940s can be attributed to economic concerns that would, with time, change:

the superior weight of the pan-Arab trend was the consequence, partly, of the fact that a very large number of the younger officers hailed from the northern Arab provinces, which leaned strongly toward pan-Arabism, inasmuch as they had been economically linked with

<sup>72</sup> Abdallah Laroui, *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual: Traditionalism or Historicism?* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1976), p. 106.

<sup>73</sup> Aziz al-Azmeh, 'Nationalism and the Arabs', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 17:1–2 (1995).

<sup>74</sup> Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba'thists and Free Officers*, Reprinted ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 28.

Syria and Palestine before World War I and now still suffered from the partition of the Arab areas of the Ottoman Empire and the obstacles of the new frontiers.<sup>75</sup>

The consolidation of a national (that is, Iraqi) market and borders eroded the salience of middle class Pan-Arabism and may help explain the subsequent dominance of communism as an explicitly *statist* movement in Iraq.

The genesis of many Pan-Arab or pan-Islamic ideas, and their articulation with statism, can be traced to intellectuals from religious establishments. The intellectuals of the nineteenth century were overwhelmingly *'ulema* [sing. *'alim*], men of religious learning. Ulema in Egypt, the Ottoman Empire and Iran were not a class apart but were stratified according to their own hierarchies and intermingled with the rest of the population. Some, as Hisham Sharabi notes, came from the lower classes in the villages and towns and were 'formed intellectually by essentially the same type of training and education'.<sup>76</sup> But religious establishments also owned land, a factor that placed them squarely within the emerging globalised political economy of the region.

This was particularly the case in Iran, where they also collected their own taxes and enjoyed significant independence from the Qajar state.<sup>77</sup> In Egypt and the Ottoman Empire, on the contrary, the *ulema* grew increasingly dependent on the state for their livelihoods.<sup>78</sup> To the extent 'national' identities were emerging they did so initially via these indigenous intellectuals who could bridge the gap between elites and the masses, combining statism with existing discursive – that is Islamic – traditions. In nineteenth century Iran, the revolutionary character of Shi'ism, propagated by *ulema* that shared with broad sections of the population disgruntlement against the Qajar state and the intrusions of imperialism, nonetheless proved instrumental in creating an Iranian sense of national identity that would, with the 1905–1907 Constitutional Revolution, further the cause of statism. As has been observed of the revolutionaries: 'they frequently referred to the teachings of Imams 'Ali, Hussein, and Hassan; but not a single one of these Shi'i Imams had ever spoken of elected National Assemblies'.<sup>79</sup>

In Cairo, Istanbul and Tehran intellectuals crafted ideologies that synthesised potentially destabilising universalist (that is, revolutionary or utopian) new ideals with the existing social glue of Islam. Intellectuals and politicians of this generation were concerned above all with political independence and the creation and safeguarding of the modern institutions through which their political and economic aspirations could be mediated and furthered.<sup>80</sup> The political universe, until the end of the First World War, was relatively narrow and confined to these elites, but the norms they established, in often antagonistic partnership with the colonial powers,

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>76</sup> Hisham Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West: The Formative Years, 1875–1914* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), p. 11.

<sup>77</sup> See Nikki Keddie, *Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan, 1796–1925* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1999).

<sup>78</sup> Gabriel Baer, *A History of Land Ownership in Modern Egypt, 1800–1950* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 60–3.

<sup>79</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, 'The Causes of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 10:3 (1979), pp. 381–414.

<sup>80</sup> See Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid-Marsot, *Egypt's Liberal Experiment, 1922–1936* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1977), p. 39; Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939*, pp. 139–40; Ervand Abrahamian, 'The Causes of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran'.



remained as the Ottoman Empire was carved up into Mandates, Egypt became a subservient constitutional monarchy and Iran fell under the authoritarian modernising regime of Reza Shah.

*Nationalism as an integrative process*

As the political sphere deepened further in the interwar period to include a larger generation of new middle classes that would come to advocate different political and ideological strategies, the vertical exchange of ideas continued as a two-way process. The notion that ideologies have not remained static over time, or among social groups, is not alien to scholars of Middle Eastern politics and International Relations. As Raymond Hinnebusch, engaging with Barnett's dichotomy, has stressed:

This contest between Arabism and sovereignty was not exclusively played out at the inter-state level and a state's adoption of Pan-Arabism (or not) was in good part a result of internal power struggles. The most successful political movements inside the Arab states in the 1950s mobilised their constituents under the banner of Arabism: radical versions of Arabism were normally the ideological weapon of rising social forces with an interest in change, specifically the new middle class challenging the oligarchy in the 1950s.<sup>81</sup>

Eric Davis, more broadly, has argued with respect to Islamic revivalism that ideological trends are intimately linked to social change and should not be viewed 'isomorphically', or detached from their immediate contexts.<sup>82</sup> But such recognition has not been integrated into the dialogues model even though there is no evidence that identity ever ceased to be socially contingent. The ideology-utopia dialectic, in other words, did not end in the 1950s.

From the 1930s nationalism came to reflect the aspirations of this new generation of middle classes in Egypt and the Fertile Crescent, often termed the *effendiyya*.<sup>83</sup> Although it is from within this group that the more 'radical' variant of Arabism arose – as Hinnebusch and others have noted – what is not always emphasised is the extent to which middle class intellectuals also embraced statism – ideas were moving both up and down the generational and social ladder. The political climate in the Middle East was not one of peasant revolution, and the 'mass' movements of the time – the Muslim Brotherhood, Ba'th, socialists, communists – were largely, though not exclusively, vehicles for the urban middle classes. They were indeed revolutionary, but tended more toward the French rather than Chinese model. To be sure, they resented the established elite's monopolisation of political authority, positions and social prestige. But they identified to a large extent with the interests of those elites in maintaining a minimum level of stability and continuity, as while they:

<sup>81</sup> Hinnebusch, *International Politics of the Middle East*, p. 65. For a similar perspective see also Valbjør 'Arab Nationalism(s) in Transformation: From Arab Interstate Societies to an Arab-Islamic World Society'.

<sup>82</sup> 'The Concept of Revival and the Study of Islam and Politics', in B. F. Stowasser (ed.), *The Islamic Impulse* (London: Croom Helm in association with Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1987).

<sup>83</sup> See Michael Eppel, 'Note about the Term Effendiyya in the History of the Middle East', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 41 (2009), p. 536.



... had no objective interest in the survival of this oppressive, obstructed transitional system, ... they did have a stake in the growth of a national capitalism. An extension of capitalism would enable the intellectuals of this class to achieve a higher social level; and expanding capitalism would need middle-level cadres and intellectual and cultural spokesmen.<sup>84</sup>

The excluded and ambitious formed a rising counter-elite whose intellectuals, 'subject to the ideological and political pull both of the classes above and below them',<sup>85</sup> were the architects and theoreticians of nationalist revolutions following the Second World War. They shared rural connections, and often conservative religious backgrounds, that certainly informed their worldviews and political strategies. In the case of Iraq, for example:

[N]ationalism did not displace the old loyalties. Although it grew at their expense, it existed side by side with them, corroding them, yes, but at the same time absorbing some of their psychological elements and expressing itself within the emotional and conceptual patterns of the Islamic religion.<sup>86</sup>

They combined these sensitivities with statism, meaning that following independence each of these orientations was sustained by regimes and among the middle classes, where the revolutionary movements and parties maintained, to varying degrees, their followings. The variable relationship between these middle class movements, on the one hand, and the state, on the other, is one that must be taken into account when scrutinising the role of ideas.

Students of nationalism in general have long recognised these dynamics. Tom Nairn, for example, has termed nationalism the 'modern Janus' to refer to the fact that social movements striving to achieve progressive modern goals – industrialisation, prosperity, independence, democracy – look inwards and backwards to draw on indigenous cultural resources and memories and mobilise mass support. Nationalist movements do not simply invent or 'imagine' national communities as the initial slate is never blank: 'all that there *was* [for nationalists] was the people and peculiarities of the region: its inherited ethnos, speech, folklore, skin colour, and so on'.<sup>87</sup> These resources are used to craft ideologies that blend the universal with the particular. The most successful such movement in Egypt was the Islamism of the Muslim Brotherhood, but here and elsewhere other movements tried in different ways to harness local resources for national ends: the 'domestication' of Syrian, Iraqi, Egyptian and Palestinian communist movements should be seen as processes in which localised versions of Marxist ideas came to inform the 'norms of Arabism' described by Barnett.<sup>88</sup>

Engaging with modernity meant accepting the sovereign nation-state as the supreme object of political identification, but disguising or 'universalising' that

<sup>84</sup> Mahmoud Hussein, *Class Conflict in Egypt, 1945–1970* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1973), p. 32. See also Laroui, *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual: Traditionalism or Historicism?*, pp. 159–66.

<sup>85</sup> Mahmoud Hussein, *Class Conflict in Egypt*, p. 29.

<sup>86</sup> Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, p. 22.

<sup>87</sup> Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (London: NLB, 1977), p. 340.

<sup>88</sup> See, for example, Joel Beinin *Was the Red Flag Flying There?: Marxist Politics and the Arab-Israeli Conflict in Egypt and Israel 1948–1965*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 57; Selma Botman *The Rise of Egyptian Communism, 1939–1970* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1988), p. 49. Batatu's tome on Iraq, cited above, amply documents the Iraqi communist party's leadership of the national movement there in the 1940s and 1950s. See also, the extended review of same by Peter Sluglett, *Democratiya*, 4 (2006).

allegiance in order to resonate with broad-based political programmes. Social movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Ba'th and communist parties, did not eschew statism, or the acceptance that diplomacy, sovereignty and compromise may be part of international politics. But they significantly augmented acceptance of the sanctity of the nation-state with supra- and sub-state loyalties. For the intellectuals of the Muslim Brotherhood, this meant elaborating a theory of Arab solidarity that was integral to their vision of Islam, solidarity with Palestinians as Muslims, a concept of *umma* as the aspirational focus of loyalty and the ultimate desire to restore the Caliphate.<sup>89</sup> For communists, on the other hand, the focus was on the class struggle internally, which, with some success, they connected to the external struggle against imperialism and Zionism.<sup>90</sup>

The emergence of competing national identities – in a process the reverse of that described by Mannheim in Europe – involved the ideological welding together of the ‘modern’ ideas that had undergirded the transition to ‘enlightened absolutism’ in Egypt and the Ottoman Empire since the early nineteenth century, with new ones derived by the counter-elite from the pre-existing traditions of society. Normative change reflected not only local reactions to European imperialism – the mechanism by which statism and the norms of sovereignty were spread around the globe – but also revolutionary change within the social formations being drawn into the international system.<sup>91</sup>

### *Reintegrating the Second Image*

The interstate, or third image, perspective results in a distorted picture of the role of ideas. We must incorporate the domestic level. It is instructive, in suggesting how this might be achieved, to return to the politics of the United Arab Republic in the late 1950s and early 1960s – considered to be pivotal in the transformation of Arabist norms and emblematic of their power in driving regional politics. A closer look at the events of this period illustrates the pitfalls of the dialogues model and the advantages of the more sociological approach suggested here. Far from being a ‘game’ carried out by Arab state players, regional politics had deep reverberations in Arab societies. Nasser’s ‘turn to the right’ following the rise of Qasim in Iraq expressed the regime’s real nervousness about the left as a domestic opposition in Egypt and Syria. It is not irrelevant to note that from 1958 thousands of communists were arrested in Egypt, leftist newspaper editors were sacked, and select members of the banned Muslim Brotherhood were brought into government.<sup>92</sup> In the Iraqi case, the domestic stakes were perhaps even higher. As Peter Sluglett has observed:

<sup>89</sup> See Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 264.

<sup>90</sup> El-Sa'id, Rifa'at, and Y. Ismael Tareq, *The Communist Movement in Egypt: 1920–1988, Contemporary Issues in the Middle East* (Syracuse: London: Syracuse University Press, 1990), p. 43.

<sup>91</sup> For analysis supporting this interpretation see Nahas, ‘State-Systems and Revolutionary Challenge: Nasser, Khomeini, and the Middle East’.

<sup>92</sup> Anouar Abdel-Malek, *Egypt: Military Society: The Army Regime, the Left, and Social Change Under Nasser*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1968); el Koshari Mahfouz, *Socialisme et pouvoir en Égypte* (Paris: Librairie générale de droit et de jurisprudence, 1972).

The battle between the Communist and anti-Communist forces in Iraq from 1958 to 1963 has been reduced by other commentators . . . to the question of whether Iraq would or would not join the United Arab Republic. The more fundamental issue, which sometimes gets lost in the narrative, was how much of a genuine socialist transformation Iraq should be permitted to undergo. If Iraq joined the UAR, political parties would be abolished, and all chance of carrying out thorough-going social and economic reforms would be lost.<sup>93</sup>

The apparent rise of 'statism' and the practices associated with the norms of sovereignty arguably owed more to the insecurities of the Arab regimes, nervous about the deepening of revolutions in individual states, than to the increased legitimacy of either the states system or state leaderships. Communists in Iraq and Egypt were against Arab unity as it would provide a cover for the expansion of Nasserist absolutism and a brake on the deepening of revolution.<sup>94</sup> In this case it was a nominally universalist societal movement representing the interests of a politically frustrated section of the middle class (and in the Iraqi case majority sect) that was working toward the entrenchment of state sovereignty, while regimes trumpeted Arabism. The phase of Arab summitry from 1963, during which, as Barnett notes, the Arab states apparently reinforced and elevated the norms of sovereignty; those same states became their most bellicose toward Israel, vowing for the first time to 'liquidate' it.<sup>95</sup> But this was arguably not as much about pandering to society as it was providing an excuse for 'radical' and 'conservative' Arab states to unite against the revolutionary tendencies in their societies. The order of causation in the following observation may, in other words, be reversed:

Arab-Israeli confrontations often had an ameliorating effect on inter-Arab conflicts. So periods of heightened tension between Israel and her neighbours were frequently characterized by temporary truces in the radical-conservative feud as was the case during the crisis over the diversion of the waters of the River Jordan in 1964.<sup>96</sup>

It may have been the 'temporary truces', entered into for domestic reasons, which led to the displays of bellicosity toward Israel.

Norms related to the threat of war (anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism) have continued to reinforce, not contradict, statism by providing a socially intelligible justification for state military and coercive apparatuses. The threat of interstate war, even if premised on 'Arabist' norms, encourages the integration of the Arab state into a global normative system, since

Preparation for war is funded by foreign military assistance or rents of one form or another, war making is undertaken with imported weapons, global strategic networks and global norms of sovereignty and nonintervention are mobilized to secure local military advantage, and peace settlements are negotiated and guaranteed by external powers.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Peter Sluglett, review of Hana Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'thists and Free Officers*, in *Democratiza*, 4 (2006).

<sup>94</sup> For details of the agreement between Egyptian and Iraqi communists on this issue see Mahmud Amin al-Alim, *Confessions of the Sheikh of the Arab Communists: Mahmoud Amin Al-Alim* [In Arabic] (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 2006), p. 43.

<sup>95</sup> Avi Shlaim *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), p. 230.

<sup>96</sup> Nahas, 'State-Systems and Revolutionary Challenge: Nasser, Khomeini, and the Middle East', p. 517.

<sup>97</sup> Steven Heydemann, 'War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East', in Steven Heydemann (ed.), *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), section 1. Available at: {<http://ark.edlib.org/ark:/13030/ft6c6006X6/>}.

But this (realist) proposition that the nature of the international system constrains, obliges or encourages statism must be balanced against the observation that societal actors also manipulate anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist sentiments with ultimately statist effects. Governments do not have a monopoly on the 'instrumentalisation' of foreign policy.<sup>98</sup> It has been recently argued that Arabism, while it has declined at the state level, has remained of high salience in society and amongst opposition movements. This is in reference to the role of groups like Hizbullah and the Muslim Brotherhood that keep alive anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist causes as well as the role of new media in the crystallisation of the Arab 'public sphere'.<sup>99</sup> But the ongoing interests of states in sustaining Arabism, and societal movements in encouraging statism, need to be acknowledged and further explored.

Some recent examples may serve to illustrate this point. Across the region, demonstrations against the 2003 invasion of Iraq expressed not just anger directed against imperialists, but also middle class frustration at the blocked, stagnant or corrupt political systems in the *states* that had failed to prevent it. In Egypt, for example, the years following the 2000 *al-Aqsa intifada* and the Iraq invasion of 2003 witnessed the formation of the *kefaya* movement, which linked Muslim Brothers, Nasserists, and others in a movement for democracy.<sup>100</sup> This impulse was echoed by intellectuals across the region, many of whom contended that, among other things, 'Arab countries need to embark on democratic reform because authoritarian regimes cannot form a bond with their population and thus are easily defeated militarily'.<sup>101</sup> The so-called Cedar Revolution or 'Independence Intifada' in 2005, which aimed at ejecting Syria from the Lebanon, represents a further example of Arabist norms (the word *intifada* invoking the Palestinian uprising) driving a move toward greater respect for sovereignty and statism. Perhaps most indicative of the mingling, and mutual reinforcement, of norms of Arabism and sovereignty between state and society is the 2005 decision by Hizbullah to enter the Lebanese government, in part as a way of retaining its military apparatus and ensuring the legality of its armed resistance against Israel. As Lara Deeb notes,

Hizbullah does not regard its participation in government as contradicting its maintenance of a non-state militia. In fact, the first item on Hizbullah's 2005 electoral platform pledged to 'safeguard Lebanon's independence and protect it from the Israeli menace by safeguarding the Resistance, Hizbullah's military wing and its weapons, in order to achieve total liberation of Lebanese occupied land'.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>98</sup> See Ewan Stein, 'The Camp David Consensus: Ideas, Intellectuals and the Division of Labour in Egypt's Foreign Policy toward Israel', *International Studies Quarterly*, 55:3 (September 2011). DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2478.2011.00672.x.

<sup>99</sup> Barry Buzan and Ana Gonzalez-Pelaez, 'Conclusions', in Barry Buzan and Ana Gonzalez-Pelaez (eds), *International Society and the Middle East: English School Theory at the Regional Level* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Morton Valbjorn and Andre Bank, 'Signs of a New Arab Cold War: The 2006 Lebanon War and the Sunni-Shi'i Divide', *Middle East Report*, 242 (Spring 2007); Emma Murphy, 'Theorizing ICTs in the Arab World: Informational Capitalism and the Public Sphere', *International Studies Quarterly*, 53:4 (2009).

<sup>100</sup> Michaelle L. Browers, *Political Ideology in the Arab World: Accommodation and Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>101</sup> Arab Commentators after the Iraq War: Advocating Democracy, Reluctantly. Arab Reform Bulletin, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (26 June 2003), available at: {<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=show&article=21609>}.

<sup>102</sup> Lara Deeb, 'Hizbullah: a Primer', *Middle East Report Online* (31 July 2006), available at: {<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero073106.html>} accessed 4 November 2010.

## Conclusion

It has not been the purpose of this article to argue that distinguishing between universal (or Western) norms and those particular to the Middle East is impossible or meaningless. Timothy Mitchell is correct to argue that distinctive 'provincial' cultural or institutional forms should be recognised as such.<sup>103</sup> But distinctiveness or particularity does not adhere – as IR constructivists suggest – to abstractions like 'society', nationhood or 'national culture', much less to even more dubious transnational categories like 'Islam' or 'the Arabs'. Nor does modernity – statism and the norm of sovereignty – adhere only to the state. Elements of the universal and the provincial must rather be sought out, identified and theorised within and throughout state and society. The norm of sovereignty – and the idea that the nation-state constituted the ultimate and unassailable expression of political identity – was written into the fabric of Arab states from the beginning. It should not be juxtaposed with Arabism. To do so is to fall into the trap of confusing ethnic traits (linguistic, religious, etc.) that remain only relatively constant across state borders, with the politicisation of *local* culture by middle class national revolutionary movements.

Attempts like those of Paul Aarts to understand the political and economic disunity, and the prospects for greater integration, in the Middle East in terms of social class – particularly the roles of middle classes – have been suggestive.<sup>104</sup> So too has been that of Keith Krause to elucidate Middle Eastern regional security with reference to the fact that 'domestic political configurations matter for regional security-building' and that 'domestic and regional politics are inseparable in any discussion of region-building'.<sup>105</sup> The black box of the state should also be opened to elucidate the role of ideas in regional politics.

It remains to briefly indicate some of the ways in which the findings of this article can advance the discipline of IR. The first would be to point out that there are multiple traditions in Middle East Studies that deal with the role of ideas, culture and identity, and those based on Orientalist or modernisation theory premises are perhaps the weakest. IR theorists should treat evidence from the Middle East with the caution and scepticism it deserves and not assume that accounts of identity debates, prominent or otherwise, represent the whole – or even correct – picture. Although perhaps harder to conduct research into the dynamics of political decision-making in this region than in some others, there are nevertheless important precedents from an historical sociology and political economy tradition that provide richer alternatives to the realist or modernisation theory approaches to Middle Eastern politics as well as models for future empirical study. More broadly, this article challenges moderate constructivism in general. It has suggested that the interstate dialogues model sacrifices considerable nuance in its attempt to 'reconceptualise the history of inter-Arab politics' and, in pursuit of parsimony, glosses over or distorts the social and political dynamics that more accurately illustrate the role of ideas in the Middle East as, undoubtedly, elsewhere. The second image, in short, cannot be discarded.

<sup>103</sup> Mitchell, 'the Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science'.

<sup>104</sup> Paul Aarts, 'The Middle East: A Region without Regionalism or the End of Exceptionalism?', *Third World Quarterly*, 20:5 (1999), pp. 911–25.

<sup>105</sup> Keith Krause, 'State-Making and Region-Building: The Interplay of Domestic and Regional Security in the Middle East', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 26:3 (2003), p. 101.